

Side By Side: Gospel Partnership in Philippians

**Would the Real Covenant Community
Please Stand Up?**

By [David Strain](#)

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Philippians 3:1-11

Now if you would, take your Bibles in your hands and turn with me to Paul's letter to the Philippians chapter 3. If you're using one of the church Bibles you'll find that on page 981. Philippians chapter 3. We're reading the first eleven verses together though our attention this morning will be on verses 1 through 3 of Philippians chapter 3. Before we read, let's turn our hearts to the Lord as we go to Him for His help in prayer. Let's pray.

Our Father, we pray for Your Spirit's ministry among us. Would You send Him to us to take up Your holy Word and work by it with power in our hearts? Unmask our idols. Chase us down all the rabbit holes we flee down. Expose all the hiding places into which we retreat so as to avoid facing ourselves and our sin and how much we need You. And would You so set Christ before us, who He is and what He's done, that we might want Him and find ourselves running to Him, wondering why ever did we go anywhere else? So come and work by Your Word in our hearts now, please, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Philippians chapter 3 reading from verse 1:

Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you.

Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh. For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh - though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I

count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith - that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Amen. We praise the Lord that He has spoken to us in His holy and sufficient Word. May He write its truth on all our hearts.

Joy and the Identity of God's Covenant People

Notice the very first word of Philippians chapter 3 - "Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord." The story's told of the little boy after church, he's at lunch on Sunday asking his father, "Daddy, what does the preacher mean by 'finally'?" to which his father replied, "Absolutely nothing, son!" If you look through Philippians from here on, two more times after this Paul says, "Finally," and then he keeps on going like many a preacher ever since. Actually, the word translated "finally" here probably simply means nothing more than "at this point in my argument, this is something that I want you to attend to carefully; here's a key stopping point that we need to linger over before moving on." And the thing he wants us to linger over especially is the need to rejoice. Joy is one of the major themes of the letter of the book of Philippians. Around fourteen times he uses "joy" or "rejoice" in this letter. This is not a small thing. Incidental to Paul's concern for the Philippian believers he wants joy in their hearts. Joy should identify them and characterize them and mark them out as the people of God - rejoicing. "It is safe for you," he says, "it's urgent; this matters. I'm concerned for you and I want to make sure that there's joy in your life."

And verses 2 and 3 help us understand why Paul is so concerned that joy should epitomize the Philippian believers. There has been, if you look at these two verses with me, there has been something of a debate raging in the Philippian congregation. There are some who claim to be the real people of God and excluding others who didn't quite measure up. It's a fight over the nature and the identity of who God's true covenant people really are. What is it that characterizes them? How can you identify them in the world? A fight for the heart and soul of the church. There was a division, a conflict over who was in and who was out. For Paul, the real mark of the true covenant community, the people of God, the church of Jesus Christ, has to do with worship, with rejoicing in the Lord, and putting no confidence in the flesh. So joy is no incidental grace in the Christian life. Joy is a distinguishing mark of spiritual authenticity. It's one of the ways you know someone is truly a child of God, when our hearts produce the good fruit of joy in Jesus Christ.

Would you look at verses 2 and 3 with me? Notice how Paul draws a sharp distinction between the false teachers who were infecting the church at Philippi and the true people of God. "Look out for the dogs, look out for the evil doers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh," he says. Those are the false teachers. "We are the circumcision who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh. Those are the true believers." You see the distinction?

I. Three Characteristics of the False Teachers

All we're going to do this morning is look at the things that identify them, the characteristics of each group that Paul addresses and then try and press some of the implications of that on our conscience. So let's think first of all about what he says about the false teachers. Three things he tells us. Mark them out. Probably he is taking up some of their boasts, some of their own slogans as they try to promote their teaching in the Philippian church and he's turning it back on its head. He's subverting their own slogans and their own boasts.

Marked by: Confidence in their Pedigree

First of all, the first boast they were making had to do with their pedigree; who they were. He calls them "dogs." Do you see that there? "Beware of the dogs." He's not being deliberately insulting much less is he telling us about their particular college football team when he says, "Beware of the dogs," but he is being provocative, no question. It was not uncommon for Jewish people in those days to describe all of those who were not part of the covenant people of God, to describe them as "Gentile dogs;" outsiders. That was the name that was given to them. You might remember in Matthew 15 in verse 24 Jesus meets a Canaanite woman who wants Him to come and heal her daughter and He's trying to test her to see if she's serious. He's trying to illicit from her real faith. And so He's challenging; He's even abrupt with her. And He says, "It's not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs. My job is to minister to the Jewish people and you're not Jewish. It's not right to take the master's bread and throw it to the dogs." And this woman's faith shines through when she says, "Yes, but even the dogs get to eat the crumbs from the master's table." And so her faith takes hold of Jesus and Jesus ministers to her and heals her possessed daughter. Jesus is using the common language of the day. And even confronted with that abrupt, even insulting language, this Canaanite woman's faith is able to take hold of Christ.

What is striking about Paul's use of that language is that he's not talking about Gentiles at all. He's talking about Jewish people - people who like to boast in their pedigree, in their Jewishness, as one of the identifying marks of being truly a member of God's covenant community. They said, "It's not enough just to

believe in Jesus. You need to come from the right background, belong to the right ethnicity. You need to be Jewish to be 'in.'" Paul says, "No, if you think like that you're a real outsider. It unmask the pollution and poison of your own heart. You're not truly a member of the people of God if you rest your confidence in your pedigree, in your background, in who you are, in your ancestry, in your ethnicity. The people of God are identified by entirely different marks - by trust in Jesus Christ and by a delight in His grace."

Marked by: Confidence in their Purity

And then secondly, after calling them out for their confidence in their own pedigree, he then challenges them for their confidence in their purity. They thought themselves to be notable for their minute and exacting observance of all the commandments of the Torah, the Jewish Law. They were ritually and ceremonially pure and clean, they thought; morally unimpeachable in their own eyes. But actually Paul says to them, "If you trust in your own performance, your purity, and how good you think you are, your best works are really acts of rebellion and disobedience and wickedness because the only way 'in' is by faith in Jesus Christ. If you trust in your purity and your goodness you're simply exposing the reality that your goodness is a shame; it is a lie." He calls them not workers of righteousness but evildoers, workers of evil - quite an insult, quite a challenge to these people who thought they were good.

Marked by: Confidence in their Performance

Then he says - not just your pedigree, not just your alleged purity, but also your performance - they were boasting in their circumcision. They had the right rituals, the right badges of belonging. "If you really want to belong to God's people you need to go through the right rituals, the right religious ceremony and performance." But Paul says to them that their circumcision, the great classic badge of belonging to God's people in the Old Testament Scriptures, their circumcision was nothing better than mutilation. "Beware of the dogs, beware of the evildoers, beware of the mutilation." You might know that in the Old Testament if you were a priest and you had some physical defect or you were physically mutilated in any way you were excluded from ever going into the temple to worship God and worship and lead His people in worship. And actually the word that Paul uses here is the word that's used in the Greek version of the Old Testament Scriptures in 1 Kings 18:28 to describe what the false prophets of Baal did when they mutilated themselves in order to try and leverage a response out of their god. That's what Paul is comparing these false teachers to - going through ceremony and religious motions in order to try to leverage from the clutches of an unwilling deity some blessing or another. Paul says that's not the way. That's not the way it is now that Jesus has come. We don't need to leverage from God acceptance and grace and kindness. It's a gift that He gives freely in His Son. The response of the heart to the grace of God in the Gospel is joyful obedience but your obedience never wins for you acceptance before God.

He gives it freely. You need only trust in Jesus Christ. And so he calls them “dogs” and he calls them “the mutilation” and he calls the Philippians to watch out for people who make their boast in their own performance, their own righteousness. He calls them “evildoers.”

It's pretty strong stuff. Paul's not mincing his words. Paul is really concerned that the Philippians hear the alarm sounding because the truth is, it is really, really easy to slip into self confidence and self reliance and self righteousness rather than trusting Jesus Christ. It's really easy. And so Paul is sounding the alarm. It's not good enough just to rejoice; we also have to beware. He wants us to be on our guard. How easy to transfer your trust from the Lord to yourself, to your goodness, to your pedigree, to your identity, to your performance. But Paul's warning really is, “Whatever you are trusting, if it's not Jesus, you're still on the outside. You're still an outsider to the covenant community. You're not the real thing at all.” And he wants the Philippians to see that and he wants us to see that and make sure that it's Jesus that we rest on and rely in.

II. Three Characteristics of the True People of God

And then he turns from exposing the false teachers to characterizing the true people of God. He shows us what they're like. Verse 3 - “We are the circumcision who worship by the Spirit of God, glory in Christ Jesus, and put no confidence in the flesh.” The Judaizers, these false teachers, were claiming they were the true circumcision, they were the true Israel, they were the real people of God. “No, no,” says Paul, “the true people of God are identified by entirely different marks. They're identified by rich, Trinitarian worship.”

Marked by: Worship offered to God the Father

That means first of all that God's people are identified by worship that is offered to God the Father. Some versions of verse 3 read, “We worship God in the Spirit,” rather than our translation which reads, “We worship by the Spirit of God.” That is to say, some versions make it clear - “We worship God the Father in the help of the Holy Spirit.” Whichever reading is the best here, Paul's theology of worship is that God the Father has the primary place, He is the central object of our worship and our praise. As he puts it in a parallel passage in Ephesians 2 and verse 18, “Through him,” that is, through Jesus, “we all have access in one Spirit to the Father.” The ordinary prevailing pattern of Biblical worship articulated in the New Testament Scriptures is addressed to God the Father. But the Jewish people were leery of addressing God as Father. They spoke about Him as “Lord; the Almighty; the Lord of hosts.” And He is all of those things, wonderfully so, but the Lord Jesus Christ taught us to pray, “Abba Father.” The Almighty sovereign Lord is, for all who trust in Christ, “our Father who art in heaven.” We come to the throne room of glory and we access transcendent majesty and we do it with the familiarity of a child to its father and we call the one seated on throne of glory,

“Abba Father.”

The Joy of the Family of Abba Father

A.W. Pink, a man hardly renowned for his warm, winning personality, once remarked about some versions of Presbyterianism. I have to confess these were Scottish Presbyterians he was speaking about. He once remarked some versions of Presbyterianism that he encountered, “in their public prayers especially always spoke about God the sovereign Lord, high and lifted up, majestic and resplendent in His glory, but they never drew near to God as children coming intimately to Abba Father. Reverent but cold. Reverent but joyless.” That’s quite an indictment. None of the joy of the Lord that Paul wants to see from verse 1 can ever thrive in our hearts or in our praises if we don’t know the reality and live the truth of our adoption as children of the living God. You’re a child of the living God of glory, adopted into His family through faith in His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. You have the ear of the King - rejoice! Rejoice! What joy should be ours to know that the absolute sovereign who reigns over all things is Abba Father, who listens to us whenever we call! You know if you met a child who, whenever their father came into the room, fled, they fled whenever their dad came into the room, we would immediately begin to be very concerned that there’s something terribly wrong in the relationship between that child and his father, wouldn’t we? Instinctively, if you’re watching this child flee when dad walks in there’s something wrong here. What does it say about us as Christians if we struggle to linger in the presence of Abba Father? If we’re slow to go to Him with joy in our hearts and pour out our concerns to Abba Father? If we’re impatient with worship? If we run from prayer meetings? What does it say about the quality and condition of our relationship with Abba Father? Doesn’t it say that there’s something terribly wrong? Paul says the people of God are the children of God and they relate to Him as Abba Father.

Marked by: Worship empowered by the Spirit

Then secondly, the people of God are marked by worship empowered by the Spirit. “We worship,” Paul says, “by the Spirit of God.” Or “We worship God in the Spirit.” It is God the Holy Spirit who connects us with the Father, who unites us to Jesus and applies Christ to us. He moves in our hearts that we might worship God acceptably with reverence and awe. He intercedes for us with groans that cannot be uttered. Rejoicing in the Lord that Paul commands us to perform is the fruit of His work in our hearts, the Holy Spirit’s ministry. Unlike the Judaizers, you know they are trying to leverage their ritual and their ceremony and their obedience and their pedigree, to prize blessings from the clutches of a resistant deity, unlike them, the children of God come freely to the Father, helped and enabled and empowered by the Holy Spirit. He’s at work in their lives and He ministers to their heart by the Word of God. The power and dynamic of true, New Testament worship has nothing to do with aesthetics and taste and musical style and pomp and circumstance and ceremony. The thing that makes New

Testament worship live is the presence of God the Holy Spirit.

And so there are implications there, aren't there? Do you pray for the Holy Spirit to work in your heart by the Word of God when you gather Lord's Day by Lord's Day? Do you pray for reality to meet God? What we need more than anything in this day is that the people of God would begin to besiege the throne of heaven with their prayers, pleading that God would pour out His Spirit in new power upon the people of God and upon the means of grace that there might be true revival among us. Do you pray like that?

Marked by: Worship of and through Christ Jesus

And then thirdly Paul says the Trinitarian worship of the people of God is worship by Christ Jesus. "We glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh." We don't trust anything. "We dare not trust the sweetest frame but wholly lean on Jesus' name." We are able to go to God. He is Abba Father to us. His Spirit dwells in our hearts because of Jesus, because of His cross and obedience and blood. He died to make us worshipers. Hebrews 10:19-22 - "Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart and full assurance of faith with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water." We have confidence to go to the throne. Wouldn't you tremble to go to the throne any other way? What makes us bold to approach the one sitting on the throne of the universe? It is the blood of Jesus Christ, God's one and only Son, who has purchased for us the Holy Spirit who makes us adopted children of God so that we can go to the one on the throne not simply as sovereign, omnipotent King, but always as Abba Father.

Joy in Knowing We have the Ear of the King

You know my children have free access. I love meeting with you all but I usually ask you to make an appointment so that I can schedule things well. But my kids don't have to make an appointment; they're welcome anytime. They know they have my ear. They know my door is open. They get to be with me whenever they want to be with me. You never need to make an appointment with the one who sits on the throne if you're a Christian, if you're trusting in Jesus. You have His ear and you have His ear because His only begotten Son bled and died to make you His child. How can you not rejoice when you take a glimpse of the cross, when you see what it cost to make you a worshiper and open heaven's doors so that you can come freely and boldly into the throne room? How is there anything but joy in our hearts at the wonders and the glory of the Gospel? How do you use the blood-bought privilege of worship? Jesus died to give you access to God, to come to Him as Father, to give His Spirit to dwell in your hearts. He died to make it, so how do you worship? Do you come prepared? Are your lips still when the

people of God are praising? Is your heart dull and flat-lined and unmoved as the good news about Jesus is displayed and placarded before you? Understand the blood of Christ was shed to make wretches His treasure, to make us worship, to give us joy and peace in believing, to adopt us into His family. How do you worship? Is it marked by joy? One of the great characteristics, one of the identifying marks of a child of God - joy in knowing we have the ear of the King. May the Lord be gracious to us that we might never put any confidence in the flesh, not in our pedigree, not in our purity, not in our performance, but in Christ alone, and in Him to revel in our adoption and by the Spirit's enabling power to go often boldly to the throne of Abba Father.

Will you pray with me?

O Lord, I thank You that You have thrown wide the gates of the throne room, the doors of the throne room, so that all who trust in Christ may go boldly to the King and call Him Abba. So now we come to You, Abba Father, praying that You will win our hearts and melt our hearts and give us joy in the Gospel as we cling to Christ. Give us grace that we may never again place our confidence before You in the flesh, in our pedigree, in our purity, or in our performance, but we may wholly lean on Jesus' name. For we ask this for His sake, amen.

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